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SUBJECT: JAPANESE MORNING PRESS HIGHLIGHTS 03/25/08

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Prime Minister's schedule, March 24

10:47

Met at Kantei with Hiroshima Mayor Akiba.

11:21

Met with Fukuoka Gov. Aso, chairman of National Governors' Association, and representatives of five other regional organizations. Met afterwards with Kenta Okamura, UN young ambassador from private-sector.

13:00

Attended Upper House Budget Committee session.

17:12

Attended LDP executive meeting.

17:55

Met at Kantei with Special Advisor Ito.

19:05

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Met at his official residence with LDP General Council Chairman Nikai, Policy Research Council Chairman Tanigaki, later joined by Secretary General Ibuki and Diet Affairs Chairman Oshima.

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4) Cabbie murder: U.S. sailor "was at a bar"

ASAHI (Page 39) (Full)

March 25, 2008

The U.S. Naval Criminal Investigative Services (NCIS) has now detained a 22-year-old U.S. Navy seaman whose credit card was discovered in a taxi where the 61-year-old driver, Masaaki Takahashi, was found stabbed to death. The slaying occurred in the city of Yokosuka, Kanagawa Prefecture. This seaman, stationed at the U.S. Navy's Yokosuka base, has denied his alleged involvement in the murder, sources revealed. He has told the NCIS that he was at a bar along Yokosuka's Dobuita Dori street when the murder took place, according to the sources. The seaman has also told the NCIS that he had lost the credit card, the sources said.

According to informed sources, the NCIS is questioning the sailor about where he was after he fled the Yokosuka base on March 8 and what he was doing on the night of March 19 when Takahashi was stabbed to death. The sailor has told the NCIS that he was at a bar along a street of entertainment and eating establishments known as Dobuita Dori, several hundred meters east of Yokosuka City's Shioiricho Nichome block, where the taxi was found with its slain driver.

Along Dobuita Dori are a number of bars and restaurants often used by U.S. Navy and other military personnel.

5) Prime Minister Fukuda has no intention to revise SOFA

YOMIURI (Page 2) (Full)

March 25, 2008

At an Upper House Budget Committee session yesterday, Prime Minister Fukuda was asked by opposition parties about the calls for revisions to the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in the wake of a series of misconduct by U.S. military personnel stationed in Japan. Fukuda noted: "I have no intention at this point in time of amending SOFA. I will focus on how to improve the operation of SOFA."

In this regard, at a news conference the same day, Vice Foreign Minister Mitoji Yabunaka referred to a U.S. serviceman assigned to the U.S. Navy's Yokosuka Base whose credit card was found in a taxi in which the taxi driver was killed in Yokohama, Kanagawa Prefecture, and said: "The U.S. side has promised to fully cooperate with Japan once the Kanagawa Prefectural Police decide to question the serviceman."

Speaking of the case in which the prefectural police ask the U.S. side to hand the serviceman over with an arrest warrant for him, Yabunaka said: "I think (the U.S. side) will naturally cooperate with the Japanese side."

6) Burden sharing for USFJ also overshadowed; DPJ opposed to sympathy budget

NIKKEI (Page 2) (Abridged)
March 25, 2008

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Dark clouds are hanging over Japan's omoiyari yosan (literally "sympathy budget") for U.S. Forces Japan. The government has asked the Diet for its approval of a plan to enter into a new special agreement with the United States to extend this sympathy budget for another three years from April. However, it now seems difficult to get Diet approval before the current special agreement expires at the end of March. The leading opposition Democratic Party of Japan (Minshuto) is strongly opposed to extending the budget while calling for reviewing Japan's USFJ-related outlays, and the DPJ will likely forgo its entry into procedures for approval in the House of Councillors. The government fears that a vacuum, should one arise in the sympathy budget's execution, would inevitably have a negative impact on bilateral relations. The government is therefore calling on the DPJ to cooperate.

"This amount of money is four times as much as that of the average family in Japan. It's too much." With this, Keiichiro Asao, a DPJ lawmaker, raised a question over the sympathy budget before the House of Councillors in its meeting yesterday. Asao called for the government to review its outlay for U.S. military housing's utilities, including heating and lighting expenses. Foreign Minister Masahiko Koumura stated, "The government will consider how to work on the U.S. side to make efforts to cut back."

The proposed plan to enter into a new special agreement is for the Japanese government to take on an annual outlay of approximately 140 billion yen, which covers utilities for U.S. military housing, wages for Japanese employees working at U.S. military bases, and other USFJ-related maintenance costs. The special agreement is a kind of treaty, so the Constitution gives the House of Representatives superiority. If and when the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors differ in their decisions on this special agreement, the House of Representatives' decision takes priority over the House of Councillors' decision. If the upper chamber does not take a vote within 30 days after the lower chamber's passage, the special agreement will be approved then.

The government and the ruling coalition wanted to get Diet approval for the plan within the current fiscal year. However, the House of Representatives' entry into deliberations was delayed until Mar. 18 in the aftermath of their standoff. On Mar. 19, the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee met. That day, however, the committee only heard the government's account of reasons for its proposal on the special agreement and did not enter into substantive deliberations. The House of Representatives is expected to approve the proposed special agreement in its plenary sitting on Mar. 28 or later.

Meanwhile, Yosho Hachiro, the foreign minister in the DPJ's shadow cabinet, grilled the government over the sympathy budget and how the money has been spent. "It's terrible," Hachiro stated. On Mar. 17, the House of Councillors Budget Committee held a meeting, during which it was brought to light that about 20 PERCENT of the Japanese government's outlay in its burden sharing of personnel costs was for bar and golf course workers. There were a number of incidents involving U.S. servicemen, so the opposition parties are raising strong objections to the sympathy budget.

If the DPJ opposes the government proposal, and if the House of Councillors remains unable to take a vote on it, the government may not be allowed to execute its relevant budget for at least one

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month. In that case, wages for Japanese workers and other payments would fall into arrears. The Japanese government informally asked the U.S. military to shoulder the burden. According to a senior official of the Foreign Ministry, however, the U.S. military disagreed with the idea.

7) Prime minister defends Ishiba regarding Aegis accident

TOKYO SHIMBUN (Page 2) (Abridged)
March 25, 2008

The House of Councillors Budget Committee conducted yesterday afternoon intensive deliberations on diplomacy and defense affairs in the presence of Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba and others. In the wake of the release of an interim report by the Ministry of Defense on the recent collision between an Aegis destroyer and a small fishing boat and the punitive actions against those concerned, the major opposition Democratic Party of Japan pursued Ishiba's responsibility. Throughout the session, the prime minister remained defensive of Ishiba, making a clear distinction between that and the questions of selecting the new Bank of Japan governor and of the provisional gasoline tax rate.

Regarding the fact that MOD produced only one interim report on the Aegis accident, punitive actions, an information leak incident and other misconduct, DPJ member Keiichiro Asao said: "We cannot help but think that the ministry intended to dilute the impact of each case." He also tacitly called for Ishiba's early resignation by citing the fact that following the Nadashio accident 20 years ago, then defense chief Tsutomu Kawara resigned from the post a month later.

In response, the prime minister said: "(The decision) was made under the situation at the time. At present, Mr. Ishiba is mulling how best the system must be revamped. I would like him to do his best."

About the fact that the Maritime Staff Office questioned the Aegis ship's chief navigator without obtaining Ishiba's approval or taking notes, DPJ member Tadashi Inuzuka raised a question about Ishiba's leadership, saying, "The (MSO) tried to handle the matter behind the closed doors behind the back of the defense minister."

The prime minister again brushed aside Inuzuka's view, saying, "(In an emergency situation), people don't have time to think about taking exhaustive notes. It's not as though everything was bad."

8) Defense policy clique independently develops MOD reform argument; LDP subcommittee reacts strongly to Ishiba vision

YOMIURI (Page 4) (Excerpts)
March 25, 2008

In the wake of a series of misconduct by the Ministry of Defense (MOD), Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba has come up with a plan to integrate and reorganize civilian personnel from internal bureaus and uniformed personnel from the staff office of each SDF force. His plan though is drawing objections not only from within MOD but also from the Liberal Democratic Party. The LDP has established under its Security Research Commission, chaired by former defense chief Gen Nakatani, a MOD reform subcommittee, chaired by Yasukazu Hamada. The subcommittee has decided to produce a set of proposals in April ahead of the government's report in June apparently with the aim of

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forestalling the Ishiba vision. The tug-of-war between the defense minister and LDP defense policy specialists is likely to intensify.

Ishiba's plan is intended to integrate civilian personnel and uniformed officers into one body tasked with three functions: building up defense capabilities, employment, and measures for the Diet and public relations. Work is underway by a MOD reform promotion team to map out specifics to realize the plan. Specific plans will be presented to the government's Council on Reform of the Defense Ministry in the Prime Minister's Office (Kantei).

Ishiba's radical plan is drawing objections from within the LDP. Nakatani, for instance, raised questions about the Ishiba vision in his book published earlier this month, wringing: "It is an easygoing way of thinking that combining (civilian personnel and uniformed officers) will produce good results."

The LDP subcommittee that held an inaugural meeting on March 19 plans to produce a set of proposals in April regarding two points: (1) responses to national contingencies and crises, and (2) how civilian control and MOD should be. The subcommittee also intends to discuss matters without being bound by the Ishiba vision.

9) Foreign Minister Koumura positive about mobilizing more SDF troops, police officers for PKOs

YOMIURI (Page 2) (Full)
March 25, 2008

Foreign Minister Koumura yesterday delivered a speech at United Nations University in Tokyo's Shibuya Ward. In the speech, he mentioned Japan's participation in UN peacekeeping operations (PKO) and stressed: "The number of (Self-Defense Forces) personnel and police officers Japan has sent to PKOs has totaled 36. This figure ranks 83rd among 119 countries. I think Japan needs to more actively take part in PKOs under the current system."

Koumura explained that Cambodia, to which under the PKO Cooperation Law Japan sent its personnel for the first time, "has now sent more than three times as many people as Japan has to PKOs." He indicated his willingness to send more personnel to PKOs.

The UN has established a PKO training center in various countries. Referring to these centers, Koumura proposed supporting those centers in Asia and Africa on a priority basis, noting, "I would like to facilitate cooperation from various angles, including sending instructors." The Japanese government is considering dispatching SDF personnel to those centers as instructors.

10) Prime Minister Fukuda indicates non-interference stance toward Tibetan riots; Would bring it up in meeting with Chinese president "If necessary"

SANKEI (Page 5) (Full)
March 25, 2008

At an Upper House Budget Committee session yesterday, Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda was asked whether he would put riots in Tibet on the agenda for discussion with Chinese President Hu Jintao during Hu's visit to Japan in May, but the prime minister refrained from coming up with a clear-cut answer and instead stated only that "If it is necessary to exchange candid views, I want to make efforts so that

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(Japan and China) can have a relationship to allow that."

Ichita Yamamoto of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) inquired: "Do you have any intention to urge President Hu to facilitate a dialogue between the Chinese and Tibetan parties concerned?"

In response, Fukuda gave his view about his diplomatic principles, noting, "The important thing is to find the other side's good points and associate with the other side in the way to help its good points to develop further." He even mentioned, "It is only natural that the two countries hold contrary opinions," revealing his nonintervention stance.

In addition, Fukuda said, "The most desirable relationship would be such that allowed China to be frank enough to say to Japan, 'You are wrong on that point,' while Japan might advise, 'China should do this or that.'" Fukuda eventually parried Yamamoto's question, but Yamamoto wanted to hear Fukuda's determination to assume a resolute attitude toward the Chinese leader.

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Masahiko Koumura, in response to the

same question, noted, "It is likely that I will touch on the (Tibet) issue" during a planned meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, who is to visit Japan on April 17-21. Koumura indicated his intention to take up the Tibet issue.

11) Lower House Speaker Kono urges ruling and opposition parties to break stalemate on provisional tax rates; Diet affairs committee chiefs to meet today

TOKYO SHIMBUN (Page 2) (Full)
March 25, 2008

Yohei Kono, speaker of the House of Representatives, called the secretaries general of the Liberal Democratic Party, Democratic

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Party of Japan, New Komeito, Japanese Communist Party, Social Democratic Party, and People's New Party in his office to urge them to break the deadlock regarding a bill to amend the Special Taxation Measures Law, aimed at retaining the current provisional tax rates, including the provisional tax for gasoline prices, over which the standoff between the ruling and opposition camp has deepened.

Kono sought a meeting of the secretaries general, saying: "If the present situation continues as is, the public will have distrust in the Diet. I want you to make efforts to break the deadlock." DPJ Secretary General Yukio Hatoyama, however, said: "A meeting of the

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Diet affairs committee chairmen should first be held. If necessary, we secretaries general should hold a meeting." Other parties agreed with Hatoyama. So, the Diet affairs chairmen will meet today. Prior to this, DPJ Policy Research Committee Chairman Masayuki Naoshima met with his LDP and New Komeito counterparts Sadakazu Tanigaki and Tetsuo Saito in the Diet building. Naoshima told them that his party had decided to reject consultations on a revision of the tax reform bill with no modifications to the bill.

Naoshima told them: "We cannot accept your proposal to hold consultations because the modified bill stipulates the special taxation revision bill should be enacted before the end of this fiscal year."

He then added: "Since we do not refuse to hold a discussion, I want

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leave the matter to the hands of secretaries general."

12) Fukuda grumbles about opposition parties' stance over gasoline tax issue

TOKYO SHIMBUN (Page 2) (Full)
March 25, 2008

Representatives from six local groups, including National Governors' Association Chairman Wataru Aso (Fukuoka governor), called on Prime Minister Fukuda at his official residence yesterday and earnestly asked him to enact by the end of this fiscal year a bill amending Special Taxation Measures Law that includes a measure to extend the current provisional gasoline tax rate. One representative said: "If the provisional tax rate is scrapped, our revenues will significantly decrease."

In response, the prime minister said:

"I would like to avoid causing you trouble. We should discuss the issue (in the Diet), staying up all night and also on the weekend. But (the opposition bloc) has continued to refuse talks. It is quite deplorable."

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13) MAINICHI (Page 1) (Excerpts)
March 25, 2008

As the ruling and opposition parties failed yesterday to reach an agreement on the government's plan to enact by the end of the current fiscal year a bill amending the Special Taxation Measures Law including measures to retain the current provisional gasoline tax, the provisional gasoline tax is bound to expire on March 31. The main opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) yesterday conveyed to the ruling camp its decision to reject their modified bill on highway tax revenues. House of Representatives Speaker Yohei Kono called on the secretaries general of the ruling and opposition parties to resolve the matter through discussion, but no progress was made. Since many Liberal Democratic Party members are negative about further concessions from the largest opposition party, the situation is that it will be difficult for the two camps to agree to hold consultations on a revision of the modified government bill.

Lower House Speaker Kono last night called the secretaries general of the ruling and opposition parties to the Diet building and urged them: "I want you to come up with measures to break the deadlock as there is not much time left (until March 31)."

Therefore, the Diet affairs committee chairmen of the ruling and opposition parties are expected to hold a meeting today. DPJ Secretary General Yukio Hatoyama said in a strong tone: "The

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mediation by the top leaders of the two Diet houses was broken by the forced vote on the fiscal 2008 state budget bill in the Lower House." He revealed again the view that the mediation by the Lower House speaker and Upper House president at the end of January that the ruling and opposition blocs should reach a certain conclusion by the end of the current fiscal year had become null and void.

14) DPJ may forgo vote on its counterproposal to highway tax bill, giving priority to lowering gasoline tax rate

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TOKYO SHIMBUN (Page 2) (Full)
March 25, 2008

With the current provisional gasoline tax rate set to expire in one week, a tug-of-war is intensifying in the Diet over the counterproposal presented by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) to the House of Councillors. The ruling camp intends to bring its bill back into the House of Representatives for a revote, based on the view that if the DPJ proposal is approved in the Upper House, it will be interpreted to mean that the government bill was rejected or amended. In an effort to avoid such a situation, the DPJ is expected to refuse to take a vote on the bill in the Upper House.

Besides the measure to extend the current provisional gasoline tax rate, the government bill also proposes maintaining the exemption of taxation on foreign capital on the Tokyo offshore market and on cigarettes and liquor brought into the nation. With the aim of avoiding having these tax-exemption measures scrapped together with the gasoline bill, the DPJ's counterproposal excludes only gasoline tax-related measures. The main opposition party plans to have it enacted in the Upper House and then send it to the Lower House and enact it there.

But the ruling coalition believes that if the DPJ plan is approved in the Upper House, the government's bill can be interpreted as having been rejected or revamped. Fearing such a situation, the ruling side has begun to emphasize that it would be possible to pass the bill by a two-thirds vote in the lower chamber, based on Article 59 of the Constitution.

Liberal Democratic Party Diet Affairs Committee Chairman Tadamori Oshima said in a press conference yesterday: "Whether to apply Article 59 is a matter that has room for discussion."

The ruling coalition cannot make a compromise on the policy of maintaining the provisional tax rate, but no prospects are in sight for the DPJ to agree to talks on revising the bill. Even in the ruling camp, some have begun to say that it would be difficult to resort to the revote option. But the government cannot afford to

worry about appearances.

Meanwhile, the DPJ is increasingly alert to the other side's moves, because if the government bill is enacted into law, its strategy to lower the gasoline tax will be torpedoed.

DPJ Diet Affairs Committee Chairman Kenji Yamaoka, with his counterparts of the Social Democratic Party and the People's New Party, intermittently met with Lower House Speaker Yohei Kono and Oshima yesterday. They proposed that the DPJ counterproposal be enacted as the speaker's proposal within this fiscal year. Their proposal stems from the judgment that Article 59 will not apply to a speaker's proposal. The ruling side rejected this proposal. Kono gave no clear-cut reply.

The DPJ earlier submitted to the cabinet a written question under the name of Secretary General Yukio Hatoyama asking if it is possible for the ruling coalition to use a Lower House revote to force the bill through. In a meeting of the Lower House Finance Committee, DPJ members asked for views of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau and the Lower House secretary general in a drive to secure a "guarantee" for preventing the possibility of the bill passed by a

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lower chamber overriding vote. The Cabinet Legislation Bureau and the Lower House secretary general, though, gave no clear replies, either.

In the DPJ, many members have begun to think it will be unavoidable to forgo a vote on the party's counterproposal in the Upper House and give priority to lowering the gasoline rate as long as the ruling side continues to refuse making a definite promise. A senior member was overheard saying: "We will wait silently until a week passes." The possibility is now growing that the gasoline and other tax measures will expire and that people's livelihoods will be seriously affected.

SCHIEFFER